

OSLC Sermon 11 19 17

Celebration of Community and Commitment

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, Psalm 90:1-8 [9-11] 12

1Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

Grace to you and peace...

This is not actually a parable about stewardship. Yes, the story is about money, and yes, today is the day we are invited to make our financial commitments to the ministry of this congregation. And, yes, this parable is often read as a stewardship parable. But it is not a parable about stewardship.

This story is one of a series of challenging stories Matthew's Jesus has been telling about the "end times," and he is telling them with an increasing urgency. The disciples have been following Jesus for three years. Jesus is aware that he is approaching his own personal "end times" as the threat of arrest and crucifixion loom large before him. Jesus is aware, too, that his disciples, his closest friends, don't seem yet to quite understand the significance of his life and his teachings. Jesus has invested himself, his whole life, in proclaiming and living the reign of God. He is "all in," even to death, and he knows it.

So he tells another story – this one about a master and three slaves. The "rule of three" is a standard literary device, directing our attention to the third character in the story.

Remember, please, that this is a *parable*, not a factual account. It is a parable that comes to us from another time and another culture. The master/slave relationship was familiar to the first hearers of the tale – and it is rightly a problematic relationship for us today. The master goes away for a long time, promising to come back later to settle accounts. Other places in Matthew's

gospel we are told that actually Jesus is with us always, even to the end of the age. This is a parable, told for a particular purpose, not an all inclusive description of the whole of God's reign.

The story is filled with hyperbole. A "talent" is a massive amount of money – one talent can be compared to 1.5 million in today's dollars. Exaggeration highlights the story-ness of the tale. Each slave is given a portion of this fortune, according to their ability. Two of the slaves go immediately and put the money to work, doubling what they had been given.

The third one puts the money into a hole in the ground to hide it.

I wonder why he was so terrified. His response to abundance and responsibility was to play it safe; to avoid all risk; and to blame his decision on his view of the master.

The rule of three draws our attention to the third character in the story, so our focus is also on the consequences this one incurs for his fearful behavior. How could the master be so harsh? Surely that is not what God is like...is it?

Two slaves risked the fortune entrusted to them with abandon, and the result was impossibly great. Any financial investor will tell you that nothing will guarantee a 100% return. But each of these two responded to abundance and responsibility with freedom. At the master's return they were commended for their faithfulness and trust, and were invited into the joy of their master.

Notice that it was not the amount of money that pleased the master – there was no favoritism for the slave with more money. The master's delight was in their living up to the trust that he had placed in them.

What so displeased the master in the case of the third slave was the way in which that one characterized the master. *“I knew that you were a harsh man,” he said, “reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”*

It almost seems as though the three slaves were serving different masters, doesn't it? I wonder if this parable could be a warning about how we picture God. The way we understand God – and faith in general, has a dramatic effect on how we shape our lives in this world.

Faith is too often understood as a sort of insurance policy. If I believe in God, God will protect me and those I love from the dangerous things in life; and ultimately my faith assures my place in eternity after I die. While we may not say it in these terms, how often have you, or others, wondered, “If God is all powerful and all loving, why does God allow _____?” Fill in the blank with your own wondering: war, starvation, cancer...our lists go on and on.

Or even worse – “God must be punishing me for something because...my mother died; I have a debilitating disease...or any number of other tragedies that are part of our experience in this world.

The first two slaves understood their master as generous and safe. The third understood him as harsh and unjust. Their perspectives shaped the way they lived, and they actually received the judgment they anticipated. Fear begets fear. Joy begets joy.

Each of our readings for today point out different attitudes people may have about the nature of God. According to Zephaniah those who are wealthy and complacent in their time believe that God will

“not do good, nor will he do harm.” Such self-centered disregard of what is holy will have dire consequences for all creation. God searches diligently for those who are faithful and trusting. All the money in the world cannot protect us from the destruction we wreak in pursuit of more.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes that we are children of the light and children of the day, “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” Clothed with a breastplate of faith and love, wearing a helmet of hope, Paul urges us to encourage one another and build each other up.

The way we think about God truly does shape the way we live in the world. Faith is not an insurance policy against danger. Rather, faith is a way of living in trust before, during, and after all the variables of life. Faith invites us to take risks and to live boldly with freedom and generosity, because the God we serve delights in giving abundance and responsibility, inviting us to enter into the joy of the master. Faith offers freedom from fear and the opportunity for generosity toward ourselves and toward others.

This is not a stewardship parable. Unless we remember that stewardship is about the whole of life – about how we invest *ourselves* in using whatever God provides. In word and deed, by faith, hope, and love, we are invited to encourage one another and build each other up. We are destined not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation, which is the healing of all creation. This is the work of Christ in which we share.

In their confirmation program four of our young people are participating in “Project \$100.” After listening to this parable, each group of youth was given \$100 and the opportunity to decide what they wanted to do with it. After some deliberation, our students

decided they want to put the money to work toward reducing climate change. They've selected the organization 350.org to support, and they are working on a plan to invite this congregation to multiply that \$100 into something more.

They've learned that from you. That creation matters. That they can have an impact by partnering with another organization. That they can turn to you for support. That they don't need to be afraid. In fact, they are quite sure you will be delighted to learn of their efforts and to join with them!

That's just one small example of what happens when we invest ourselves in the ministry of this congregation. Children learn that they belong; that they matter. Young people learn that they have agency. Adults learn that they are not alone, no matter their stage in life. All of us learn that our resources, pooled together, can accomplish far more than any of us can accomplish alone. And each time we gather we are reminded that, in fact, God has not gone away to a distant place, but is with us today, tomorrow and always, inviting us into the joy of the master. Do not be afraid.

Amen.